



Hugo Kauder, by Ssu-Tu Chiao, 1942

A new kind of chamber music
competition recognizes a
twentieth-century composer's legacy.

HONOR THY FATHER

Otto Kauder is an unassuming, soft-spoken man. Onstage in Yale University's Sprague Hall this past June, thanking the audience for coming out to the first annual Hugo Kauder Competition for String Quartets, which honors the life and music of his late father, he seemed shy, even slightly awkward, and said very little. But when I spoke with him one-on-one later that afternoon and got him talking about his father, his mood changed. Otto, an elderly man with a thin frame and broad, slumped shoulders, gestured animatedly and beamed. He told me how "utterly moved" he was to hear his father's music once again in live performance.

BY STEPHEN RODGERS

He told me that his father's eighth string quartet was in fact premiered in Sprague Hall, in 1946, by the Strad Quartet, and then listed the names of its members without a moment's hesitation. He told me how he and his dad used to play string quartets together (Otto plays violin and viola; so did Hugo) and how they would often end their sessions with a Haydn quartet, because, as Hugo put it, Haydn was "the reward for the hard work before." And he told me how grateful he was to his daughter, Helen, who helped to organize the competition.

This family affair is something of an anomaly in the world of chamber music competitions. Most contests are centered around presenters, not composers; some of the best known are the Banff International String Quartet Competition, the Coleman Chamber Ensemble Competition, the Chamber Music Yellow Springs Competition, and the Fischhoff and Naumburg Chamber Music competitions.

Helen Kauder is well aware of the distinction. As the director of Artspace, a contemporary arts non-profit organization in New Haven, Connecticut, she knows a fair bit about the importance of providing a venue for emerging talents to showcase their work; and, to be sure, a large part of the Hugo Kauder Competition's mission is to do just that—to support young chamber musicians who might not otherwise have the funds or the opportunities to get themselves heard. (Competitors must be 35 years of age or younger.) But she also knows that Hugo Kauder is a name unknown to many musicians and speaks openly about her hope that the competition will at the same time get *him* heard. Preliminary submissions must include at least two movements of one of Kauder's string quartets and—it comes as no surprise—a complete Haydn string quartet. First- and second-prize winners receive \$10,000 and \$5,000, respectively, as well as a sponsored public performance,



The Euclid Quartet,
winner of the 2004
Hugo Kauder competition

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which of course includes a Kauder piece. And when they go on the road, these quartets will have that piece in their repertoire. Hugo Kauder may be indirectly lending these musicians a hand, but they are also lending him one.

Born in 1888 in Tobitschau, Moravia (in what is now the Czech Republic), Kauder spent his formative years in Vienna, before escaping in 1938 to the Netherlands when the Nazis took over Austria and then, following a brief period in England, ending up in the United States in 1940. He was self-taught as a composer and made his living writing music and teaching music theory, composition, and violin in New York City until his death in 1972. His legacy includes a vast array of chamber music: numerous sonatas for piano and stringed instruments, no less than nineteen string quartets, and a collection of violin solos. He also wrote five symphonies, about a hundred songs, and works for chorus and solo piano.

The past year has seen two performances of his works, no small feat considering that many of Kauder's compositions have not been performed in decades. Flutist Josephine Chan Yung and pianist Norman Dee played Kauder's Sonata for Flute and Piano at a recital in New York City's Yeshiva University Museum on March 10, 2004. The performance, sponsored by the newly established Hugo Kauder Society, was held in conjunction with the exhibition *Vienna: Jews and the City of Music 1870-1938* also at the museum, which is part of the Manhattan Center for Jewish History. Three months later, on June 6, violinist Sylvia Kim and pianist Lisa Leonard performed a program of Kauder's works at the Steinway Piano Gallery in Boca Raton, Florida. At the Kauder Competition for String Quartets, more than one person claimed that his music was undergoing a “renaissance,” and while the word admittedly

had a ring of wishfulness, the evidence so far suggests that the society's efforts toward spreading Kauder's name are working, and that his music is beginning to find the audience it deserves.

Kauder wrote not only music but also articles and books about music, including a slim tract on counterpoint (*Counterpoint: An Introduction to Polyphonic Composition*, published in English in 1960) and one on harmony (*Entwurf einer neuen Melodie- und Harmonielehre*, published in 1932). A glance at his counterpoint text gives an immediate impression of what his music is like, and what drives it. In the book's preface, Kauder argues that tonal counterpoint is neither a theoretical nor a historical discipline, but a practical one—not something students ought to learn so that they know about the music of the past, but something still alive and useful. Well aware that in the mid-twentieth century many

believed traditional tonality had run its course—and no doubt also well aware that he would be compared with his countryman Arnold Schoenberg, whose method of twelve-tone composition was being fervently carried on by his disciples—Kauder became tonality's champion. He believed that once the twelve-tone furor had passed, the natural “moving and shaping forces” of music would be rejuvenated. Considering the decline of serialism in recent years (save in the music of its last holdouts, Milton Babbitt) and the popularity of the unapologetically diatonic music of John Tavener and Arvo Pärt, who himself abandoned serialism in the 1970s, Kauder's prediction wasn't so far off.

Sitting in Sprague Hall on Friday, June 19, listening to the opening of Kauder's String Quartet No. 3, a simple, unaccompanied, diatonic melody played with just the tenderness and ease it required by Elizabeth Freivogel of the Jupiter Quartet, one of three groups competing in the final round of the Kauder contest, I had no doubt about the sincerity of Kauder's mission. His music has been described as contrapuntal and conservative, and it certainly is that. But what struck me most was not the materials he used—triadic harmonies; singable, sometimes modal melodies; points of imitation; harmonic progressions that you could put Roman numerals beneath—but his attitude toward them, something not expressed by the descriptors “conservative,” “traditional” or “tonal.” This music is neither a Stravinskian parody of old-fashioned idioms, nor shamelessly sentimental. It believes in what it is saying but does not oversay it.

The Boston-based Jupiter Quartet (Nelson Lee, violin; sisters Meg and Elizabeth Freivogel, violin and viola; and Dan McDonough, cello), which won grand prize in the Fischhoff Chamber Music Competition in mid-2004—as well as first prize at the Banff a few months later—seemed to believe in what Kauder's music was saying, too. They took Kauder's third quartet

as seriously as they would one by Mozart, and gave it the care and the time it needed to be appreciated by ears that had never heard it before. Particularly impressive was their haunting rendering of a long section in the middle of the single-movement piece, when the opening theme returns in minor (now played by the first violin). Each time it reaches its final note, it is interrupted by a series of glasslike, pianissimo chords in the other instruments. Here was a chorale whose harmonization seemed to have been erased, only to appear as a hazy afterimage once the melody was done. And here was confirmation that this quartet, however much it might sound alternately like Haydn or Schubert or Dvořák, was nonetheless a product of its time: Nothing about it could be described as modernist, but it was not anti-experimental. The experiments just happened to be less radical—trying out different textures and tone colors, as in the chorale bit, toying with pace by moving unexpectedly from one episode to another rather than in a direct, logical path. Though not all of the quartet's passages held my interest (particularly when Kauder tended to lose momentum in long, contrapuntal sections), those that did overwhelmed me, because they appeared suddenly, serendipitously, like flashes of inspiration.

Kauder string quartets were not the only music on the roster. The Jupiter Quartet finished with Mendelssohn's String Quartet Op. 13, something of a departure, and perhaps a risk, since the ensemble's submission to the jury, which had guaranteed them a spot in the final, had included a different work, Haydn's Op. 76, No. 5. Whether intended or not, the result of the change was a stunning juxtaposition of two works, composed more than a century apart, which sounded at times as if they might have come from the same pen. The Mendelssohn begins with a gorgeously spacious chorale, which returns at the end of the final movement beneath a soprano pedal point on the fifth scale degree, a wonderful echo of the eerie chorale from the Kauder quartet. I do not know if the Jupiter members were aware of the connection, or if they chose the Mendelssohn quartet to highlight it. But I wouldn't put it past them—since the overriding impression given by their performance was that they fully understood what they were playing and why they were playing it.

The Hyperion Quartet, another competitor, formed in 1999 at the Eastman School of Music; its members are currently graduate assistants to the Miami String Quartet at Kent State University. The group performed Kauder's String Quartet No. 2 and Haydn's Op. 76, No. 5, the work Jupiter had submitted. This earlier Kauder quartet, rather more conventional than the third because it contains three separate movements—and also bar lines, something Kauder dispensed with in many of his pieces—is also more uneven. Full of wit and some clever flourishes, the piece nonetheless loses in warmth what it gains in gusto.

Neither Jupiter nor Hyperion came away with the grand prize, however. It was announced Sunday morning, June 21, several hours before the Winners Concert scheduled for the afternoon. That honor was bestowed upon the Euclid Quartet (Jameson Cooper, violin; Jacob Murphy, violin; Luis Vargas, viola; and Amy Joseph, cello), a group formed in 1998 in Ohio and, since 2001, resident string quartet of the Sioux City Symphony and faculty at Morningside College in Sioux City, Iowa. (The quartet, like the Jupiter, is a member of Chamber Music America.) From what Helen Kauder told me, the jury—consisting of Joel Lester, dean of the Mannes School of Music; Aldo Parisot, cello professor at Yale; and Stanley Ritchie, violin professor at Indiana University—was divided between Jupiter and Euclid. I was divided, too. Listening to both groups perform on Sunday, I was as taken by the Jupiter Quartet's sensitivity as I was by the Euclid Quartet's vigor. Jupiter electrified the crowd of about sixty with its second performance of Kauder's third and its first of Haydn's Op. 76, No. 5. (Many applauded between movements—not, it seemed, because they didn't know any better but because they couldn't help themselves.) Euclid performed Kauder's String Quartet No. 2 and Haydn's Op. 76, No. 4, in the finals and the Winners Concert. In the former piece, Haydn's influence was everywhere to be heard: in the funny tonal shifts, the syncopated rhythms, the rhetorical flair. The Euclid Quartet played the music's phrases fearlessly, with great surges of energy. And I came to realize that Kauder's music, however contrapuntal and apparently “constructed” it may have been, was borne along by a

deeper impulse than a concern for structure and a reverence for the techniques of tonality: Play was more what he had in mind.

It is the same impulse that inspired the contest organizers to facilitate a “jam session” on Saturday, June 20, during which members of the Jupiter and Euclid quartets gathered informally in Sprague and sat together to sight-read Kauder pieces for two, three, and four parts. And in retrospect, this spirit of play, coupled with a feeling that we were all of us guests at a coming-out party,

is what made it seem as if something rare and significant were happening over the three days of the Kauder contest. Something like sympathetic resonance: a family overjoyed that the music of its most cherished member was finally getting its due; a crowd that sensed as much, and yet felt sympathy for this music because it was *good*, not just in need of listeners; and twelve young performers who were buffeted by that enthusiasm, and played better for it. This, even more than Haydn, was “reward” enough.

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